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Hard Decisions Avoided

GIs and Heroin:
The Facts of Life

By Flora Lewis

JOHN W. PARKER, director of strategic intelligence in the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, knows a good deal about Southeast Asia's contribution to the dope problem. And while he is a soft-spoken Southerner, sometimes so quiet one has to strain to hear him, he is the most straightforward man I have yet found on the subject in the administration.

He starts with an explanation. Remember, he says, that until 1970 we were concentrating on the drug problem here in the United States. Not too much attention was paid by the bureau to the source of supplies. And the Army, the CIA, the State Department, the people out there where the heroin comes from weren't concerned about drugs. They were concentrating on other problems.

Further, while there has been opium in Southeast Asia since the British introduced it in the early 19th century, until 1970 the heroin refineries in the area were all in Thailand and Hong Kong, Parker says. It didn't seem to affect the United States.

In fact, the dominant government attitude was that this was a fact of life in Asia which Americans shouldn't try to upset, especially since by the beginning of the decade so many Americans were so deeply engaged in trying to control other facts of Southeast Asia's life, namely the Vietnamese war and all its offshoots.

Now, according to Parker, practically all the heroin refineries have been resituated along the Mekong River, in Burma, Thailand and Laos, and "almost all have been identified."

If so, why hasn't the United States, which completely subsidizes and virtually runs Laos and has poured billions into Thailand, whose "volunteer soldiers" it employs in Vietnam and Laos, made sure the heroin factories were destroyed?

The obvious urgent question didn't annoy Parker. On the contrary, his stolid face slowly eased into a Cheshire cat grin. At first he didn't say anything. I suggested that the reason wasn't hard to guess and wasn't really secret.

"I know," he said. "I'm struggling not to say it."

IT IS AT once a simple and excruciatingly tough answer. As he finally pointed out, it is a matter of political decision in Washington. There is a choice to make. It would be easy to blow up the refineries, defoliate most of the poppy fields, push the governments involved into cracking down on their own high-level military and civilian profiteers and blocking the supply of heroin to GIs in Vietnam and, increasingly, to the United States.

But it would be a severe embarrassment to allies in Southeast Asia. It would hinder the prosecution of the war in Indochina, perhaps so seriously that basic U.S. policy would have to be changed.

There have been some changes in the past year, but they have followed a pattern of seeking compromise with the drug-producing countries, not confrontation.

The CIA has changed its rules in an effort to stop the use of its private airline, Air America, for the transport of drugs in Laos. Although only two months ago CIA Director Richard Helms adamantly denied there had ever been any agency involvement in the traffic, he is now said to have told a secret congressional hearing that there was involvement but it has been stopped in the past year.

The U.S. Embassy in Laos has pressed the government there to put through a strict law on drugs which may be passed this month. There was none before.

The U.S. Embassy in Saigon got the Vietnamese government to remove some of the corrupt customs officials, and similar efforts are being made in Thailand. With Congress vociferously taking up the issue, the White House is cracking the whip on all the assorted American officials who thought drug traffic was not their concern, who thought their job was only fighting the war, gathering intelligence, maintaining foreign relations.

THE QUESTION is whether these relatively gentle pressures will convince governments largely dependent on the United States that they must fight heroin. Years of argument got nowhere in Turkey, but a threat to cut off foreign aid finally did.

Now the Turks have promised to wipe out opium production after the 1972 crop, which means that in three or four years that source of supply will dry up. Parker is convinced now that the Turks can and will enforce the ban. But ask him how much difference it will make in the amount of heroin supplied to Americans.

"If nothing else is done," he says flatly, "no difference." And the "something else" can only be done in Washington, a decision to be just as tough in Southeast Asia as the Nixon administration was in Turkey.

Meanwhile, the inch-high vials of 96 to 98 per cent pure heroin distributed in South Vietnam have begun to turn up in the United States. The bureau foresees an almost uncontrollable flood as veterans return, find themselves without jobs and realize how much money can be made by having buddies or friends send them supplies from the Far East.

Addicts can be treated, but there isn't much likelihood that there won't be far more new ones than cures each day unless the flow of heroin is cut at the source. At the Bureau of Narcotics, experts are convinced that is possible, except perhaps for a limited trial, but there is no sign it is going to happen. The hard political decision hasn't been taken.